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ON WHY RACE MATTERS

Teaching the Relevance of the Semantics and Ontology of Race

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This chapter defends the philosophical importance of teaching the semantics and ontology of race in opposition to those thinkers who are dismissive of race on the grounds that race is semantically and ontologically derelict. In sanctioning the philosophical respectability and credibility of race, I draw upon some of the ideas and strategies I have utilized in teaching race, some of the recurrent assumptions about race that students bring into the classroom, and some of the substantive insights emergent from my teaching regarding the philosophical status of race.

Before I drive headlong into the body of this chapter, it is important to register a few brief observations about the status of race. There exists a mythology about race in our culture. This mythology, among other things, consists of clusters of assumptions, presuppositions, conceptions, practices, rituals, metaphors and beliefs. Like other mythologies, our mythology of race facilitates ways of making sense of diverse and often chaotic social, cultural, historical, and political phenomena. And, although questions about the truth or falsity of this mythology itself are philosophically idle, a condition characteristic of all mythologies, we use this mythology to determine the truth condition of individual statements about race. Our mythology makes possible styles of thinking about race; indeed, we modify our style of thinking about race in relation to the foundational and structural shifts in our cultural mythology of race.

Like all mythologies, our mythology of race claims no hegemonic consistency. Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe this mythology as schizophrenic rather than as contradictory. Nevertheless, the basic conservative epistemological inclination of human agents to avoid making radical changes to their belief system functions to maintain overall epistemological stability. This much is obvious, since this human characteristic gradually and very slowly integrates ideas or experiences that would severely disrupt the stability of our mythology of race.

Currently, there are at least four major features of our mythology of race worthy of recognition. First, it is almost axiomatic today to hear the effortless repetition of the idea that appeals to race constitute a new racism, or, rather, that such activity is racist if not by design then as a consequence of such activity. In other words, uses of race, appeals to race to interpret or to render meaningful contested aspects of our political, social, and/or economic practices are declared racist. Second, within the discipline of philosophy, the reigning consensus is that race is an illegitimate concept, a concept deformed by impeachable semantic and ontological imperfections. Third, even as there are great pressures, ranging from the cultural to the scholarly, to transcend race, racism remains a persistent feature of daily life. So entrenched is racism that basic indicators of social well-being indicate greater and greater disparities in health, education, housing, and wealth between Whites and Blacks. And, fourth, despite the above claims, race remains a potent cognitive reality infused in the everyday lives of individuals, a persistent structural feature present in every aspect of daily existence. It seems that, as the calls for the end of race become more repetitive and aggressive, race takes on the ontological profile of an apparition. Indeed, it would not be too much of a stretch to draw an analogy here between the calls for the demise of race and Nietzsche's observation regarding the death of God. We recall Nietzsche's poignant observation that, although God is dead, the shadows of God still remain. So, God's presence remains even if it is the case that belief in God is no longer sustainable. Similarly, even as we witness obituaries of race, as it were, the shadows of race persist, indicating that we are far from being done with race.

The general structure of this chapter is as follows: the first section tells the story of an encounter with a student; the second section focuses on some of the challenges Black philosophers confront with regard to teaching philosophy; the third section investigates issues related to the notion of false clarity with regard to race; the fourth section concerns strategies to promote racial literacy as an antidote to notions of color blindness; section five concerns the importance of enabling students to appreciate how an appropriate understanding of race is beneficial for understanding their everyday existence; section six tackles the semantics and ontology of race, focusing on the constitutive status of race; section seven inserts race into the contested context of political philosophy, with the aim of establishing the analytical veracity of race in illuminating our political reality; and, finally, section eight examines some of the concerns emergent from the relation between race and the discipline of philosophy.

Why Race Matters

Cornel West recently visited my university to deliver a lecture to a mixed audience of faculty, students, administrators, community leaders, and the general public. Due to the hybrid nature of the audience, West delivered a lecture that, he hoped, would resonate with the various groups constituting the audience. West, being

probably the most gifted orator in the United States, did an amazing job of underscoring, among other things, the importance and relevance of philosophy, the importance of civic engagement and responsibility, and the importance of carrying on the infinite struggle against all forms of hatred, prejudice, and bigotry. He also called specific attention to the enduring legacy of slavery and the persistence of racism in American history and society, and sought to explain the importance of critically confronting the past in the attempt to build a better world. And, finally, he underscored the relevance of race as a category of analysis, as well as an existential mode of being. West enunciated this latter point by referencing the African American blues and jazz musical traditions.

I have mentioned West's visit and lecture in order to underscore the haunting problematics of critically engaging race and racism in the American academy. About two days following West's visit, one of my more advanced students, a White male in his early fifties, approached me. He had previously owned a business, fell on hard times, and decided to earn his college degree. This student very politely expressed his exasperation about the lecture, for, according to him, talk about slavery, racism, and race was very unhelpful; indeed, he added that it is this kind of discourse that contributes to the persistent blemish of racism. While speaking with a sense of unmitigated confidence, and seemingly convinced by the progressive thrust of his thinking, he effortlessly declared racism and considerations of race as best located in the past, an irrelevant past precisely because we now have a Black president. Obama's election to the presidency, according to him, is evidence enough to establish a collective societal maturity in transcending the vile limitations of race. Indeed, this student quickly informed me that, when he observes both West and me, he does not constitute us as Black men. Somehow, our level of education has miraculously rendered us "raceless." Hence, as my student proceeded to convey to me that to describe myself as Black, to race myself, is to reduce my standing as an individual.

I have mentioned my encounter with this student precisely because he is a paradigmatic representative of the liberal view of race. Liberalism urges each individual to adopt a posture of color blindness. Not seeing race is a very important and effective way to preclude treating individuals on the basis of irrelevant physical characteristics. Furthermore, as liberalism instructs us, racism persists to the extent that talk of race remains a prominent feature of our social and political discourse.¹ Indeed, liberalism formally frames, as well as substantively determines, the content of our mythology of race. Hence, liberalism encourages us to join in the celebration of a postracist society; we have reached the telos of antiracist struggle in actualizing a society where race, at best, qualifies as a semantic and ontological fiction.

As previously stated, I discuss some of the strategies I use to defend the importance of understanding race not as some unfortunate concern, capable of gaining only the support of those unlucky and uneducated individuals who are seduced by its promiscuous appeal. I defend race as a legitimate category of

interpretation and analysis. Furthermore, I also defend race as a lived reality that cannot be eliminated, abolished, or transcended, either because it is as a matter of personal choice or through the utilization of a sterile logic, which exposes its unsavory contradictions, confusions, and ambiguities.

Race and Racism in the American Academy

Teaching philosophy in predominately White North American universities offers great professional opportunities to Black philosophers. At the same time, many obstacles confront Black philosophers engaged in this professional undertaking.² The "disability" is acute for the Black philosophy professor precisely because of the transcultural embedded stereotypes regarding the analytical "incapacities" of African peoples. We are told that philosophy requires high levels of abstract and analytical thinking, and, since Blacks are predisposed to be highly emotional and excessively sensual in their basic mode of being, they are incapable of reaching the requisite degree of cognitive detachment and logical distance from raw emotion and subjective experience, as required by the conceptuality and universality of philosophy. While Blacks easily succeed in music and in other "softer" academic fields, they struggle in the more analytically demanding disciplines, such as philosophy.

There is a certain double jeopardy, perhaps a species of Du Bois's notion of double consciousness, which already frames the vocation of the Black philosophy professor. First, the Black professor of philosophy must also contend with what Miranda Fricker identifies as testimonial injustice. Fricker variously defines testimonial injustice as the harm or wrong a speaker suffers because of the prejudice of a hearer who believes that the speaker lacks epistemic credibility. In Fricker's own words, testimonial injustice is "[t]he basic idea . . . that a speaker suffers a testimonial injustice just if prejudice on the hearer's part causes him [or her] to give the speaker less credibility than he [or she] would otherwise have given."³ This projection of epistemic incapacity imposes upon the Black professor of philosophy unsavory burdens that his White colleagues need not contemplate or confront as serious challenges. Fricker also maintains that an individual can similarly suffer if one is granted too much epistemic credibility. For even when Black professors of philosophy are recipients of epistemic credibility, they are still severely restricted to serving only as experts on race and judged as insufficiently competent to excel in other areas of philosophy with the requisite degree of analytical rigor and competence.

The Black professor of philosophy must contend not only with hermeneutical injustice, but must also navigate an additional burden. The dissonant call to denounce race as a fiction, totally devoid of cognitive validity, and also as incapable of serving as a legitimate category of analysis, inflicts hermeneutical injustice on the Black professor of philosophy. Fricker variously describes hermeneutical injustice as occurring when a group is disadvantaged by fact that it lacks

the appropriate concepts to understand aspects of its social experience. Here, the focus is on the relative depressed and inadequate epistemic resources and productive potential of a subordinated group in comparison to other groups that control greater disproportionate epistemic resources. Clearly, nullification of the use of race by Blacks to make sense of their being-in-the-world is tantamount to imposing an insurmountable epistemic burden on them. Indeed, this idea is really an invitation for Blacks to impose upon themselves a crippling epistemological crisis, for, in surrendering the analytical as well as the existential capabilities of race, Blacks would, thereby, render a significant portion of their existence, particularly their identity and history, epistemologically opaque and existentially fraudulent.

Teaching Race: The Notion of False Clarity

As previously stated, I describe the various strategies I employ to promote relevant epistemic issues and normative values when teaching race. Put differently, I teach about race partly to unsettle the racial illiteracy that prevents most students from entertaining or expressing ideas that cannot be adequately expressed in the cognitive system of assumptions, principles, and categories that make possible the dominant paradigm of race. I also teach about race to encourage students to think beyond the reigning dominant mythology of race in order to imagine alternative styles of thinking that would be more conducive to a rethinking of the reality of race, as well as appreciative of its analytical force. We should note that, according to the dominant view, it is not permissible to describe individuals as belonging to a race. Rather, our challenge is to treat individuals qua individuals as moral and political equals. This dominant view holds that race is not real because, among other things, it is not an essential feature of what makes a person the person that he or she is; hence, race is an illegitimate concept. Since race is not really real, talk about race promotes racism or else cynically encourages efforts to "play the race card" and inflame racial hostility. Another aspect of this dominant view is the effortless exploitation of the metaphor of color blindness, urging that we should all struggle not to see the accidental features of individuals such as skin color. Race, accordingly, is an irrelevant external feature of individuals, best relegated to the status of an accident of one's private history.

There is a false clarity underpinning the dissemination of the dominant liberal view of race. The admonition to view society as a collection or aggregate of isolated individuals, occupying a level plane where diverse opportunities and goods await distribution on the basis of merit, as determined by a fair and open competition, advertises a certain simplistic view of society that promotes a false clarity and confidence. A serious problem emerges from promoting false clarity. Instead of illuminating the complexities of the sociocultural world, false clarity distorts these dense complexities. Those who present a view of the sociocultural world as representative of the outcome of fair competition for resources among

free and rational individuals invite us to accept existing economic and political outcomes as natural and fair. In this conception of things, race, as announced by many adherents of formal equality, plays no significant causal or explanatory role, since individuals compete as isolated individuals and not as representative members of particular races. However, this tendency to exile race from our understanding of things is, ironically, just another strategy to code racist motivations in the neutral language of formal equality, equal opportunity, and individualism. As will be made clear in this chapter, failure to recognize the materiality of race is to indirectly support the more sinister consequences of racial practices.

Another insidious feature of false clarity about race is the uncritical embrace of an epistemology of ignorance.⁴ Among other things, the epistemology of ignorance actively promotes a false or distorted perception of reality, either because of the discomfort of acknowledging certain facts about the world or the willingness not to know certain things because of the fear that this knowledge would unsettle one's perception of the world. From another context, we can think of the epistemology of ignorance as a collective agreement not to know, an agreement to misinterpret the world by deliberately ignoring or discrediting knowledge that would cause us to face hard truths about the system that we live in. As is to be expected, dominant groups conspicuously benefiting from the strategic misinterpretation of things, or strategic blindness not to see certain things, usually consider these various distortions or one-sided descriptions as acceptable. Ultimately, even our dominant political discourse crystallizes around clusters of misinterpretations that structurally cohere with the functioning of a system of social, economic, and political arrangements that reinforce the power and vested interests of dominant groups.

Racial Literacy as an Antidote to Color Blindness

My antidote to color blindness—a cognitive condition that ultimately mutates into cognitive disorientation—is to promote racial literacy; that is, the critical ability to read and interpret the world through the category of race. Without assuming race to be an objective feature of the physical world, I emphasize the fact that the sociocultural world is a human construction, or, in Kantian language, constituted by a network of concepts, categories, social practices, and institutional arrangements. Consequently, since race is part of the sociocultural world, race too is a construction that is socially, culturally, and existentially real, even if race is not empirically real and observable in a manner similar to the perception of physical objects. The reality of race does not depend on whether or not race is an objective feature of the world, precisely because race acquires legitimacy as a root metaphor by which the sociocultural world, among other things, became a human achievement.

I develop the preceding claims by calling attention to the use of language. Here, I challenge the dominance of realism, the view that there is an objective

world existing totally independently of our language and concepts. Furthermore, that an objective world exists and its ontological structure is totally indifferent to the structuring powers of human consciousness. Since the world is independent of language, the role of language is to passively mirror or represent the world as it is; the structure of language should be isomorphic with the structure of the world. A basic tenet of this realist conception of things is that the primary purpose of language is to state facts and to say what is true. Language's primary goal is informational. Within the context of race, I discuss the fact that language is not merely a passive medium or a blunt tool restricted to expressing true statements. Language also functions in nonliteral modes; specifically, a system of metaphors. We use language as a vehicle of semantic extension, a cognitive device to describe one thing in terms of another. Language is also performative, as described by speech act theory. In the slogan of speech act theory, we do things with words;⁵ language is actional by virtue of the fact that it can alter the affectivity of place or space, and it also ontologically inspires the diachronic presence of various discreet entities. Language conjures beings into existence. For example, an individual, or a group of individuals, can mobilize racist language to harm (psychologically harm) or to dehumanize others. This use of language is not fact stating. Rather, in this case, it is utilized to bring about certain effects in the world. Consequently, the semantic validity of racist language is not contingent upon whether or not race claims an objective ontological status. Such language gains its semantic authority from the cluster of patterns of intentions, beliefs, practices, structures of feelings, and so forth of human beings.

Racial Literacy as an Antidote to Hermeneutical Injustice

Racial literacy also has the potential to enable students to avoid two incapacities: (a) the inability to correctly and effectively understand the everyday materiality, or reality, of race, and (b) a cultivated inability to meaningfully discuss the general semantics and ontology of race. I explain to students that these incapacities make them victims of hermeneutical injustice, the injustice of lacking the necessary concepts for understanding a significant area of their social experience.⁶ This hermeneutical deficit prevents one from gaining access to crucial aspects of self-understanding. For example, we can imagine the existential and epistemic vertigo that can paralyze an individual who lives in a world in which race is persistent, but the individual lacks a competent understanding of the role of race in shaping the affairs of daily life. The trauma associated with the realization and awareness that one is indeed raced can be particularly troubling, especially if one previously lived in an environment that sheltered one from the practicality of understanding themselves as raced.

Michael Monahan, in his recent bold philosophical defense of the reality of race against the racial abolitionists and racial eliminativists, has enforced the inescapability of race and why attempts to transcend race are destined to fail.

Race, according to Monahan, is not an annoying, irrelevant, and insidious contingent property of persons that ought to be rejected. As he writes:

One's racial being . . . is not a fixed and given essence—it is neither a property that we simply possess, nor is it a strictly contingent activity that we can choose to abandon. It is . . . more a sort of location or context, and it is in this way, as inevitably conditioning one's subjectivity, that racial reality must be understood. One's Whiteness, Blackness, Asianness . . . is not something that can *be* purely in the way the politics of purity would have us believe, but it is also impossible for one to purely *not be* raced, or simply decide by voluntary fiat *how* one is raced.⁷

We are all raced in that we are born into a human reality infused by race. However, our race is not a dangerous fiction. And as Monahan states in a different context:

Race is something that we *do* not something that we *are*, and it is, importantly, something that we always do in concert with others, whose ways of doing race inevitably shape the ways in which we are able to do (or *not do*) race.⁸

The claim that race is inescapable, as to be expected, is bitterly resented by many White students, mainly because of the perception that Whites are raceless and also because of the unquestioned normativity of whiteness. Indeed, White students often articulate their protest against race in terms of their not being responsible for the sins of the past. At these times, I often resort to the philosophical uses of history for the purpose of getting students to understand that, although they were not present at the founding of the United States as a sovereign entity, they have been born into a society in which White skin color has been privileged. The point is not that each and every White individual in the past and in the present has been successful in accumulating disproportionate amounts of wealth and opportunities, but that White skin color has historically been used as a marker for access to wealth and opportunities. Du Bois's "Psychological wages of whiteness,"⁹ Cheryl Harris's notion of "whiteness as property,"¹⁰ and George Lipsitz's notion of the "possessive investment in whiteness" are but three examples of this phenomenon.¹¹ It should be noted that I introduce these ideas not for the sake of alienating my White students, but to set them on the path of working through, as well as critically engaging with, their inherited historical traditions in the hope that they will gain a critical appreciation of how race has infused these diverse traditions.

With regard to hermeneutical injustice, I also address why a distorted appreciation of the relevance of race can aggravate interactions among groups that are racially designated as Black. Some individuals who are phenotypically Black resist racial categorization by announcing that they are not African American, and that, since they are not African American by birth, then they

should not be classified as Black. The opposition is further amplified by the claim that those who consider all people of African descent as being of the same race are racist because they assume that all people of African descent are identical in all regards.

I intervene in this protest against racial classification by communicating to students the importance of understanding, as well as appreciating, the difference between race and ethnicity. On the one hand, I explain that race, despite being a social construction, is also vaguely correlated with the biological features of a person; that is, there is some degree of ontological reciprocity between the sociocultural and the biological. But I am careful to communicate to students that even this modest appeal to biology is not an appeal to biological essentialism about race. Rather, it makes race a biosocial concept. I also explain the appropriateness of appealing to biology in this context by invoking such notions as geographical isolation and biological mutation. I critically discuss how these notions clarify the tangled dynamics of biology, culture, and history, a tangled relationship that sustains the emergence of groups with different genetic histories.

On the other hand, I explain that ethnicity is a cultural category, dependent upon linguistic, religious, dietary, musical, and other differences between groups. For example, African Americans and Haitians are of the same race; namely, Black. However, they are of different ethnicities, precisely because of differences in religion, language, music, and tradition of food, among other things.

Another important point that I discuss regarding the difference between race and ethnicity is the legal imperative of racial classification. I have encountered many students, both Black and White, who are highly offended by requests for racial self-identification. Again, I explain to students that the main reason why this information is requested is not because the government has an interest in pressuring individuals to identify themselves racially even if individuals are in principle opposed to such self-identification. I explain that the purpose of racial self-identification is intimately connected with the enforcement of various regimes of civil rights and antidiscrimination laws. For example, plaintiffs in a class-action antidiscrimination lawsuit, among other things, must materially establish that they suffered harm caused by the racial discrimination of an employer, and that this harm in question was due mainly to their racial identification. An effective way to establish that harm has been done is to, among other things, review and critically scrutinize the history of the employer's interactions with the group in question. One way to obtain this information would be to review job applications to detect possible patterns of discrimination, and this method would certainly focus on racial identification.

Appreciating the difference between race and ethnicity enables students to understand why practices of racial classification need not suggest that all individuals so designated share a common culture, or religion, or even language. At the same time, I also critically discuss why it is unrealistic to expect that sociocultural concepts, such as race, will determinately possess clear and discrete

boundaries. Indeed, I underscore the fact that race and ethnicity, as sociocultural concepts, are often contradictory, contested, indeterminate, and fuzzy. However, these characteristics neither render these concepts illegitimate nor do they nullify their application.

The Semantics and Ontology of Race

In underscoring the constitutivity of race—namely, its semantic and ontological contestability—I also endeavor to provide students with a dynamic understanding of racism, one that I hope would vastly equip them to better appreciate its contestability and contradictory profile. Put simply, racism is not merely or primarily a personal or individual issue; neither is racism an exclusively private phenomenon of isolated individual prejudice, the mere expression of individual preferences. Of course, it should be noted that there is individual-based racism, but this kind of racism need not be considered the paradigmatic case of racism. Nevertheless, the question is precisely how wide ranging are the effects of individual racist behavior compared to the effects of insidious institutional racism?

Nevertheless, in the attempt to distance racism from a strictly individual modality, I am careful to establish why racism exists even if there are no individual racists. Racism can persist and flourish without the existence of self-identified racists.¹² The common view is that racism is an individual incapacity such that a racist individual is an individual who holds insidious and vile beliefs about other individuals because of their race. Racism, in this view, is commonly framed as an internal, private state of consciousness; once again, considered primarily as an individual phenomenon. Instead of defending this individualistic model of racism, I attempt to lead students to appreciate racism as an institutional phenomenon in which people with good intentions can, through the apparently neutral functioning of institutions, engage in practices with crippling negative racial impact.¹³ This institutional approach to racism underscores racism as an external phenomenon in the sense that, once again, racist structures are not located in the minds of isolated individuals, but are manifestations of deep and recalcitrant structures of inclusion and exclusion affecting the outcome of complex social, political, and economic interactions. In other words, racism is not the manifestation of some rational incapacity or an unfortunate psychological defect; rather, it is institutional in the sense that individuals do not exist in a void. Their behavior, values, goals, and so on are shaped and constituted by the various human practices that constitute the life-world of human existence. The basis of racism is not merely or primarily biologically determined, but is socially inspired and facilitated, and this fact underscores the intimate and dynamic connection between the individual and external normative structures.

In appealing to institutional racism, I make it clear to students that, unlike Jim Crow racism, which was visible, public, and legally sanctioned, institutional racism

is not always visible and public in the same way, precisely because it often hides behind the rhetoric of neutrality. Furthermore, unlike individual-based racism, which is primarily motivated by intent, institutional racism is not necessarily motivated by racist intentions. Institutional racism is, among other things, the negative racial impact inflicted upon certain groups as a consequence of the implementation of racially neutral policies. For example, residential segregation resulting from the neutral operations of the real estate market—meaning the operation of the real estate market in accordance with the laws of supply and demands and freed of any legal barriers based upon accidental features of an individual—can have a devastating impact upon Blacks. This harm usually takes the form of Blacks not enjoying adequate access to educational opportunities and to the job market. Again, ample evidence confirms two significant facts about segregated, poor communities: they do not attract new businesses, and their schools are usually savagely underfunded and poorly staffed. Clearly, then, the negative racial impact resulting from neutral practices occur without there necessarily being individuals with malignant racial motives, seeking to distort the housing market to disproportionately favor Whites. But, again, it is important to note that to focus on institutional racism does not necessarily entail the rejection of individual racism.

Race and Political Philosophy

Another reason for emphasizing the semantic legitimacy of race and its ontological reality is to empower students to become more competent readers and interpreters of the political world. While political liberalism preaches the virtues of individualism, I encourage students to question this view of political reality. Again, I discuss how the gospel of liberal individualism obscures the structures of opportunities that excessively benefit dominant social groups while severely limiting the opportunities available to historically subordinated groups. Appeals to individualism and the relevant modalities of individual responsibility and individual merit give rise to the false notion that race does not matter and that there is a level playing field of competition. The problem, however, is that liberal individualism cannot explain the disparities in wealth, education, health, and opportunities between Whites and Blacks in terms of natural individual differences in talents and skills.¹⁴ Liberal individualism invites us to embrace a false equivalence between Blacks and Whites as participating in a fair competition, while failing to confront the structural differentials that relegate Blacks to subordinate positions. In this context, in order to underscore the persistent reality of race, it becomes important to deflate excessive appeals to individual responsibility and individual failure, potent notions that serve the purpose of shifting blame to Blacks for failing to exercise the requisite initiative to take advantage of opportunities. We are often told that, since Blacks tend to view themselves as a collective political entity, they complacently depend upon the government

to better their situation. However, this kind of collective political redemption will never materialize, precisely because American political ideology is grounded in a social ontology of individuals and not groups; only individuals are legitimate political actors.

Although it would be absurd to totally deny the limited relevance of individual accountability, I underscore the existence of enduring patterns of racial discrimination and inequality that render idle efforts to discount entrenched historical structures of racial discrimination.¹⁵ Indeed, there is the risk of practicing blindness to history, which would prevent one from effectively perceiving how race remains a major factor in determining differences in outcome between Blacks and Whites.¹⁶

I also attempt to connect the plausibility of race to the collective behavior of groups. Far from society being a stage of dramatic individualistic competition, a competition open to all individuals regardless of race, it is, rather, a stage of competition among groups seeking to maintain group privileges across a wide spectrum of goods and opportunities. In this case, what emerges is that Whites, as a racial group, engage in the opportunity of hoarding resources.¹⁷ This phenomenon can be explained in terms of the control of major institutions, on all levels of society, by Whites. This resort to the notion of hoarding, I argue, is necessary because it explains the constant condemnation of policies crafted to provide opportunities to Blacks. Such policies are said to involve programs that unfairly harm Whites by denying them equal access to opportunities; hence, the discourse of reverse discrimination.

Indeed, appeals to reverse discrimination unnecessarily amplify attempts to articulate an unbiased commitment to fairness and equality. I explain to my students that it is important to respond to dogmatic appeals to reverse discrimination by establishing that these appeals, even if unintended, are really attempts to privilege the notions of individualism and individual merit. A basic narrative emerges from when these notions are taken as foundational to our political discourse. This narrative takes the following form: If society is truly, or, at least, should be, an arena of fair competition among individuals, then the government should not create laws that privilege any racial group. And, if past discrimination against Blacks was wrong, to adopt laws favoring or granting Blacks special privileges that are not extended to Whites is also wrong. Hence, affirmative action, to the extent that it is a group-based program and that it privileges Blacks over Whites, it is a form of discrimination against Whites; affirmative action is reverse discrimination. I point out that the problem with equating affirmative action with reverse discrimination is the attempt to establish a false equivalence. Efforts to provide Blacks with opportunities and to eliminate the negative effects of racial discrimination are not equivalent to the historical project to establish White supremacy and the normativity of whiteness. Affirmative action is not intended to send a message of racial subordination or of inferiority to Whites, as was the case with the legally sanctioned practice of Jim Crow.

The discrimination Blacks faced was categorical and universal in scope. Furthermore, it was not some unfortunate deviation from the norm, but, rather, historically sanctioned as legal, even by the government of the United States. Blacks were denied opportunities to obtain education, accumulate wealth, secure decent housing, gain access to and even secure political power. Acts of discrimination directed at Blacks were meant to send a message, a message of inferiority. Affirmative action is radically different from antiblack discrimination because its main purpose is not to universally exclude Whites from participating as full citizens in society. Affirmative action is not a form of antiwhite racism. Neither is affirmative action an attempt to severely limit access by Whites to education, jobs, housing, health care, and so on. Far from demanding that Blacks should be hired in preference to Whites, it merely encourages employers to take affirmative steps to actively reach potential Black applicants when there are vacancies, specifically in light of the reality that Blacks were and continue to be discriminated against based upon their racial identity. And, even if an employer desires to hire a Black candidate, they must hire a qualified candidate and not the first Black applicant. Affirmative action communicates no message of racial inferiority to Whites.

Finally, in my efforts to weaken the attractiveness of appeals to individualism, merit, and personal responsibility, I introduce Charles Mills's notion of the racial contract to expose the hollow core of concepts such as formal equality of opportunity when such concepts are extricated from the flow of history.¹⁸ We recall that the purpose of social contract theory was, among other things, to explain legitimate authority and why free, rational, and self-interested individuals have an obligation to obey the laws and commands of a group calling itself the government. The basic narrative of social contract theory is that individuals voluntarily entered into an agreement to assume the burden of obeying laws in order to enjoy certain mutual benefits. On the social contract view, since the government is an expression of the will of the people, the people are obligated to follow and obey the rules enacted by the government.

Mills challenged the basic methodological assumptions of the social contract theory, arguing that in its bleached philosophical guise, it does not convincingly explain modern society. Rather, Mills favors the metaphor of the racial contract, precisely because, as he claims, it does a better job of explaining what has been going on in modern society. In Mills's view, Blacks were not equal participants in the social contract; the contract was an agreement among Whites. To the extent that Blacks participated, they participated primarily as objects and not subjects of the contract. The agreement among Whites recognized Blacks not as persons but as property, as slaves and not as free, rational, and self-interested individuals. The importance of introducing Mills's conception of the racial contract to my students, among other things, is to deflate pretensions of individual accomplishment, to underscore the ontological prominence of race for an adequate understanding of modern society, and to expose the invisibility of whiteness as normativity.

Clearly, then, one goal of my efforts is to lead students to the realization that race is neither some idiosyncratic feature of one's private history nor a matter of personal, subjective preference that one can choose either to ignore or to recognize. Rather, race emerges as an objective phenomenon with its own autonomous ontological status. This development suggests that understanding race also requires situating race in the broader context of the historical narratives that constitute the structures of intelligibility that render our various practices, institutions, and conceptions of selfhood meaningful.

Finally, as previously stated, I teach that the concept of race, although an intersubjective construction, nevertheless enjoys a degree of autonomy. Concepts need not answer to some objective reality in order to possess semantic and ontological sovereignty. Consider the fact that although the name "Hamlet" does not refer to an actual individual, there exists in our culture a set of descriptions and even an identity that we associate with this proper name. The name represents a cluster of ideas about human existence and questions about the meaning of life that can provide an individual with some degree of cognitive guidance in the midst of an epistemological crisis. The literary tradition of teaching the play *Hamlet* does not excessively display an obsessive interest in determining whether or not an actual individual answering to the name "Hamlet" existed.

Consequently, just as the name "Hamlet" need not designate an actual individual in order to function in the multiple ways it does in our culture, similarly, concepts such as race are objectivities that exert a tremendous amount of power, totally independently of whether they refer to determinate objects in the world.

Race and Philosophy

I want to conclude by briefly discussing some of the philosophical points I share with students regarding the relationship between race and philosophy. With regard to the ontological status of race, I do not advocate either the elimination or the abolition of race. Although both eliminativists and abolitionists have denounced race on grounds of its semantic and ontological deficiencies, I approach race as a sociocultural concept and, therefore, apply different semantic and ontological requirements to race. One highly plausible theoretical approach to the ontology of race is dynamic nominalism, as formulated by Ian Hacking.¹⁹ Hacking calls his position "dynamic nominalism" because he connects nominalism with our interaction with, and description of, the world. Hence, he maintains that categories of people come into being at the same time as the people falling under those categories, and that there is a reciprocal relation between these processes. Applying the insights of dynamic nominalism, we can infer that an individual's racial identity does not exist independently of socially constructed categories such as Whiteness or Blackness. Consequently, the status of these terms cannot be decided totally independently of human activities.

There are other issues warranting a brief consideration with regard to the relations between race and philosophy. Indeed, these concerns are methodological insofar as they relate to the question of method in philosophy. Here, I am limiting my focus to the practice of analytic philosophy and the amplification of logical analysis as the most effective style of philosophical practice. Of course, it should be noted that the point is not meant to repudiate the uncontested importance of logical analysis within philosophy. My concern is to expose the bad faith of philosophical practice when philosophy is reduced to the clarification of meaning, a task motivated on the questionable assumption that natural language desperately needs comprehensive logical overhauling in order to determine and conclusively fix the meaning of our concepts. This demand for necessary and sufficient conditions of the meaning of terms breeds a fascination with logical and linguistic analysis that ultimately lead to the denigration of certain concepts, concepts such as race, insofar as they cannot be tamed by the regimentation of either rigorous logical or linguistic analysis. The fetishizing of analysis geared towards the necessary and sufficient conditions for the use or application of terms leads to a search for concepts with sharp and definite boundaries. This rhetoric of meaning, which stipulates that legitimate concepts should possess sharp and clearly defined boundaries, prevents us from appreciating the extent to which certain concepts fulfill all the semantic and ontological work they are called to perform, even as they admit to being indeterminate, contested, and, at times, stubbornly ambiguous. What, in one view, qualifies as semantic blemishes, are, on another view, virtues that accommodate the flux and change of the everyday world, the sociocultural world, of existence. In other words, instead of seeking to determine the validity of concepts in terms of the pure, formal categories of logic, it seems that concepts such as race should be understood in terms of experience-centered categories; which is to say, naturalistically.

Closely connected to the fetishizing of analysis is the problem of scientism; that is, science as ideology.²⁰ In this context, the issue is to curtail the extension of a certain imperial practice of colonizing all areas of philosophy through the expansion of the methods, the semantics, and ontological presuppositions of the natural sciences. The proponents of this kind of naturalism confidently advocate that science provides the most plausible methods for ascertaining meaning, truth, and knowledge. Armed with these assumptions, many philosophers adopt the conceptual framework of natural kinds that stipulate such terms as the paradigmatic case of legitimate concepts. Fiercely parading the notion that natural kinds terminology designates entities existing independently in the world and that are identified by virtue of possessing a molecular essence, race is declared semantically counterfeit and ontologically fictitious precisely because there are no essences that determinately identify unique races. Again, we see the tendency to denounce race as philosophically suspect, for, in this case, race is declared unreal because it does not satisfy the standards stipulated for a concept to be a bona fide scientific concept. Race fails to be a natural kind term.

A final disability of philosophy's failure to deal with race, a failure that I attempt to communicate to students, stems from the tendency of some philosophers to denigrate the sociocultural world, as well as the contingency of human existence itself. In emphasizing the importance of objectivity, universality, and the a priori status of consciousness, these philosophers encourage a defiling of the materiality and sociality of human life. The point here is not that we should naïvely and uncritically attach ourselves to the prejudices, biases, and unreflective frames of mind that dominate our complacent mode of existence. Rather, as reflective agents, we should seek to overcome the various distractions that compete for our attention and that seek to compromise the quality of our thinking. Nevertheless, the assumption that we can only successfully achieve these tasks by decisively escaping the reality of our being embedded in networks of human practices, discourses, rituals, and so on is to invite the picture of human life as a life from a God's-eye perspective. This picture of unencumbered human consciousness, a transcendental consciousness hovering above the realm of being, as it were, must inevitably dismiss the lived reality of race.

George Yancy has called attention to the otherwise concrete, existential status of race as a lived reality. Yancy focuses, among other things, on the issue of Black subjectivity and investigates the extent to which the black body has traditionally served as the site of various condescending and dehumanizing stereotypes that the dominant culture has traditionally associated with Black existence. Excavating the dense layers of stereotypes that have crushed visions of Black subjectivity cannot be accomplished through the execution of a philosophical practice antagonistic to the concreteness of human existence. In other words, philosophical method dogmatically invested in abstract analysis and the invisibility of the human subject cannot do justice to the existential reality of race as a lived actuality. George Yancy brilliantly captures the regressive thrust of this philosophical method regarding race. He writes:

A great deal of important scholarly work argues that race is semantically empty, ontologically bankrupt, and scientifically meaningless. In short, many philosophers posit that race is an illusion, that there is no factual support for a racial taxonomy. Since race has no referent and does not cut at the joints of reality, so to speak, it is said to be a fiction. Thus we are told to abandon the concept of race just as we abandoned the concepts of phlogiston and spontaneous generation. A physicalist's rejection of race is logically compatible with acceptance of racial eliminativism. "The eliminativist argues that races do not exist, either because they fail to be objective or because they've been falsely posited by hopeless theories of human difference." The problem with this, however, is that the phenomenological or *lived* intelligibility and reality of race (as it is *socially ontologically* lived) exceed what is deemed "real" within the framework of physicalist ontology. Indeed, one can reject the concept of race from a

physicalist perspective and yet engage in various forms of social performance that are racist. In other words, one can live/embody the *fiction* of race in such a way that generates *real effects* in the social world. It is also important to note that to believe that there is nothing more to say about race because it is impossible to reduce it to a naturally occurring object in the spatiotemporal world is to engage in a form of disciplinary hegemony.²¹

In another context, Yancy comments on the tendency within philosophy to valorize the perspectiveless perspective as a philosophically ideal location of thought:

I theorize from a place of lived embodied experience, a site of exposure. In philosophy, the only thing we learn to "expose" . . . is a weak argument, a fallacy, or someone's "inferior" reasoning power. The embodied self is bracketed and deemed irrelevant to theory, superfluous and cumbersome in one's search for truth. It is best, we are told, to reason from *nowhere*.²²

When we turn our attention to the concrete exigencies of lived reality, instead of pursuing strategies of existential erasure, Yancy maintains that we acquire a better understanding of the existential dynamic of the black body as a White construction and, consequently, gain an appreciation of the historical career of race in the contradictory and ambiguous role of thwarting Black subjectivity as well as sustaining notions of Black subjectivity, grounded in acts of resistance to White normativity.

This chapter neither defends an original thesis nor is it a nest of consistent theses. Rather, it functions as a gathering of interpretive insights garnished from critically confronting the mythology of race in the classroom. I have done so not from some perspectiveless perspective, but from the standpoint of a Black professor of philosophy, actively resisting the scourge of epistemic suspicion, and one who actively engages his students, especially White students, to become philosophically and historically literate vis-à-vis the concept of race. This willingness to defile the artificiality of attempts to cast doubt on the legitimacy of critically working through the challenges of race requires the courage to embrace alternative conceptions of philosophy, as well as different styles of thinking about race. It is with these alternative conceptions that I invite my students to engage.

Notes

- 1 For a solid discussion of this kind of reasoning, see Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield, "White Philosophy," *Critical Inquiry*, 20(4), Summer 1994: 737–757.
- 2 For a very interesting account of this phenomenon, see Bruce Kuklick, *Black Philosopher, White Academy: The Career of William Fontaine* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
- 3 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

- 4 See Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) and Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).
- 5 John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1971).
- 6 Ibid., 149.
- 7 Michael Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2011), 204.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935).
- 10 Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, 106(8), June 1993: 1709–1791.
- 11 George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998).
- 12 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
- 13 For a fine discussion of institutional racism in terms of negative racial impact, see Gertrude Ezorsky, *Racism and Justice: The Case For Affirmative Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
- 14 Douglas S. Massey, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007).
- 15 For a recent philosophical investigation and discussion of the institutional nature of discrimination, see Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 16 For more on the idea of "blind to history," see Peter Charles Hoffer, "Blind to History—The Use of History in Affirmative Action Suits: Another Look at City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.," *Rutgers Law Journal*, 23, 1992: 271–296.
- 17 For more "opportunity hoarding," see Michael K. Brown, Martin Carnoy, Elliott Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Shultz, and David Wellman, *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-blind Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).
- 18 See Mills, *The Racial Contract*.
- 19 Ian Hacking, "Five Parables," in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, eds. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- 20 Susan Haack, *Defending Science—Within Reason: Between Science and Cynicism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).
- 21 George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 33.
- 22 Ibid., 65.